Synthesis and Thermoelectric Properties of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ Composites

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Abstract: Thermoelectric (TE) materials are a kind of energy material which can directly convert waste heat into electricity based on TE effects. Ternary Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ material with diamond-like structure has become one of the potential TE materials due to its low thermal conductivity and adjustable electrical conductivity. In this study, the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ powder was prepared by vacuum melting-quenching-annealing-grinding process. The nano-TiO$_2$ particles were introduced into the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix by ball milling. Spark plasma sintering (SPS) was employed to fabricate the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites. The X-ray diffraction (XRD), field emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM), and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) were used to study the phase and microstructure of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites. Electrical resistivity, Seebeck coefficient, and thermal conductivity measurement were applied to analyze the thermoelectric properties. For the 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite, the electrical conductivity was improved whereas the Seebeck coefficient was lower than that of pure Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$. For other TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ samples, the Seebeck coefficient was improved while the electrical conductivity was reduced. The thermal conductivity of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites was lower than that of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix, which is attributed to the lower carrier conductivity. A maximum $ZT$ of 0.30 at 700 K for the 1.0%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite was obtained, which was 17% higher than that of the pure Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ at 700 K.

Keywords: thermoelectric; Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$; nano-TiO$_2$; composites

1. Introduction

Humans need to care for our “mother earth” with intelligence, diligence, and heart. In a society experiencing an energy shortage, the pursuit of sustainable development has become the social mainstream. With rapid economic development, industrial scale expands. However, energy and environmental problems gradually appear at the same time. In the process of industrial production, most energy is released in the form of heat. Thermoelectric (TE) materials can directly convert waste heat into electricity based on the Seebeck effect [1,2]. While TE materials show a great prospect environmentally and economically, the lower efficiency of TE materials limits their wide application. The efficiency of TE materials is determined by the dimensionless figure of merit $ZT$, which is defined as $ZT = \frac{\alpha^2 \sigma T}{\kappa}$, where $\alpha$ is Seebeck coefficient, $\sigma$ is electrical conductivity, $\kappa$ is the thermal conductivity, and $T$ is absolute temperature. A good TE material should have high $\alpha$ and $\sigma$ as well as low $\kappa$ value. The intrinsic properties of TE materials determine the coupling effect between the conductivity and Seebeck coefficient. Generally, the higher power factor (PF = $\alpha^2\sigma$) corresponds to higher power output. PF is proportional to the effect mass ($m^*$) and mobility of the carriers ($\mu$). Thermal property is determined by the total thermal conductivity ($\kappa$), which is composed of lattice part ($\kappa_L$) and carrier part ($\kappa_c$). Electronic thermal conductivity ($\kappa_e$) is proportional to the conductivity. Reducing the $\kappa_L$ of a TE material is an effective way to reduce the total thermal conductivity.


Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ with a diamond structure has gained great attention recently due to its low thermal conductivity originating from the complex crystal structure and high specific heat. In addition, Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ has good electrical conductivity and adjustable electrical properties [3]. To further improve the thermoelectric properties of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$, a great deal of research has been carried out to optimize the material from multiple perspectives. Li et al. obtained a maximum $ZT$ of 0.45 for Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ material at 773 K by one-step high-pressure combustion synthesis (HPCS) [4]. Liu et al. prepared the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ material using combustion synthesis and obtained a maximum $ZT$ of 0.51 at 773 K, which is the best result for Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ compared to other methods [5]. Wang et al. optimized the synthesis parameters to form uniform particles of wurtzite, cubic, linear heterostructures, and tetrapods by colloidal synthesis. The facile synthesis strategy opens pathways for extension to other compositions of multielement copper chalcogenides where the cubic and hexagonal phases can be formed [6]. Ge et al. and Ahmadi et al. synthesized Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ nanocrystals and controlled the nanostructure successfully by solvothermal method [7,8]. In addition to optimizing the preparation process, doping of materials is also an important way to enhance the performance of TE materials. Cho et al. synthesized a Ga-doped Cu$_2$Ga$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$Se$_3$ sample and approached its theoretical minimum value of lattice thermal conductivity, resulting in a $ZT$ value of 0.5 at 750 K [9]. Fan et al. reported a lower lattice thermal conductivity of the Cu$_2$Ga$_{0.075}$Sn$_{0.925}$Se$_3$ sample and obtained a maximum $ZT$ of 0.43 at 700 K [10]. In addition, Skoug et al. confirmed that substituting Se with S is also an effective method to improve the TE performance of Cu-based ternary selenides [11]. The combustion synthesis method can prepare high-performance thermoelectric materials, but it is difficult to precisely control. Moreover, many studies report that only Sn location is the best candidate for substituting in the Cu$_2$Sn(Ge)Se(S)$_3$ structure, which limits the improvement of TE performance [3,8,10]. Based on those limits mentioned above, the composite was designed on the Cu-based ternary selenides matrix. Some studies confirmed that introducing a nanophase into the Cu-based semiconductor can improve the $ZT$. Zhang et al. introduced graphite nanosheets into CuGaTe$_2$ and obtained the highest $ZT$ of 0.93 for the CuGaTe$_2$ composite at 873 K, which is 21% higher than that of CuGaTe$_2$ matrix [12]. Li et al. reported that the incorporation of a suitable quantity of nanophase PbTe particles into SnSe matrix could efficiently enhance the TE performance of SnSe material [13]. TiO$_2$ has a band gap of 3.0 eV and has good thermal and chemical stability as well as large elastic modulus, which makes it a good candidate as a second phase. TiO$_2$ has been introduced into a filled-skutterudite matrix in previous studies [14–16]. However, introducing nano-TiO$_2$ into Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ has never been reported. In this study, the technological parameter was optimized to synthesize pure Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ material. The nano-TiO$_2$ was incorporated into the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix by ball milling method, and the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ thermoelectric composites were prepared by spark plasma sintering (SPS). The thermoelectric properties of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites were investigated in detail.

2. Experimental Procedures

2.1. Materials Synthesis

In order to ensure a desirable Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ compound, elementary powders of Cu (powder, 99.99%), Sn (powder, 99.99%), and Se (shot, 99.99%, Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd., Shanghai, China) were weighted accurately to the atomic ratio of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$. Then, the powders were mixed in an agate mortar with ethyl alcohol and dried in vacuum drier at 350 K. Next, the powder mixture was loaded into a graphite crucible, which was sealed in a quartz ampoule under vacuum. After the above steps were completed, the quartz ampoule was put in a vertical furnace heated slowly to 1273 K and held for 12 h, followed by cooling with different rates (samples 1–3). Then, some thus-obtained samples were annealed at 923 K for three days (sample 4). Finally, the ingots (sample 1–4) were ground into fine powder in an agate mortar.

Commercial nano-TiO$_2$ powder (average particle size: 7 nm, 99.8%, Shanghai Chemical Industry Park Co., Shanghai, China) was incorporated into the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ powder by ball milling in an argon
atmosphere at volume fractions of 0.5, 1.0, 1.4, and 1.8 vol %, respectively. The TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite powder was obtained in a planetary mill at 300 rpm for 180 min. The weight ratio of balls to powders was about 10:1. The TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite powders were densified by spark plasma sintering (SPS 2040) in graphite die (10 mm in diameter) at around 740 K for about 8 min under uniaxial pressure of 50 MPa in vacuum.

2.2. Phase, Structural Characterizations, and Transport Property

The densities of all the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite samples were measured by Archimedes method. The constituent phases can be detected by X-ray diffractometry (Cu K$_\alpha$, D8-Advance, Bruker Corporation, Karlsruhe, Germany). The microstructure was characterized by field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM, QUANTA 250 FEG, ThermoFisher Scientific, Hillsboro, OR, USA) on polished and fractured samples. Transmission electron microscope (TEM) observations were performed on a JEM-2010 instrument (JEOL, Tokyo, Japan) with the voltage of 200 KV. The electrical conductivity and Seebeck coefficient were measured simultaneously using commercial equipment (ZEM-3, ULVAC-RIKO, Tokyo, Japan). The Hall coefficient ($R_H$) was measured using the van der Pauw’s method in vacuum with the magnetic field of 2 T. The carrier concentration ($p_H$) and mobility ($\mu_H$) were estimated from the relations of $p_H = 1/(eR_H)$ and $\mu_H = \sigma R_H$ based on the assumption of single band model, where $e$ is the electronic charge. The thermal conductivity can be calculated by using the follow equation:

$$\kappa = C_p \times d \times \lambda$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $C_p$, $d$, and $\lambda$ are specific heat, density, and thermal diffusivity, respectively. The thermal diffusivity was measured by a laser flash technique (LFA427, Netzsch, Wunsiedel, Germany) in a flowing Ar atmosphere. Specific heat was measured from room temperature to 700 K in argon using a differential scanning calorimeter (DSC1-1600HT, STA 409, Netzsch, Wunsiedel, Germany). All the measurements were performed in a temperature range of 300–700 K. All the measurements of thermoelectric properties were carried out three times to ensure the accuracy of $ZT$ value.

3. Results and Discussion

Figure 1a shows the XRD patterns of the resultant Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ samples after melting and annealing with different cooling rates. Samples 1 and 2 were cooled from 1273 K to room temperature in 24 h and 48 h, respectively. Sample 3 was directly quenched in salt water. Sample 4 was annealed at 923 K for 24 h after quenching in salt water. The XRD patterns indicate that Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ can be synthesized by melting at 1273 K for 12 h and annealing. The Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix is a disordered zincblende structure with a lattice parameter of 5.684 Å. Figure 1b shows the XRD patterns of different samples from 10$^\circ$ to 40$^\circ$. There was no significant difference between sample 1 and sample 2, while the sample 4 had fewer peaks, which may be indexed to the monoclinic structure [3]. The structure transformation in Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ from monoclinic to cubic can be attributed to the different cooling rates. Skoug reported that slow cooling could result in a monoclinic structure while water quenching led to a disordered cubic zincblende-like structure [17]. Delgado et al. reported that an order–disorder transformation in Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ can occur at 723 K and the modified phase was found to be sphalerite [18]. In order to comprehensively and thoroughly study these phases, Marcano et al. found that the phase in low diffraction position was likely to be SnSe$_2$ on the basis of differential thermal analysis (DTA) [19]. Therefore, the structure of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ can be described as an adamantane compound which is derivative of the sphalerite structure. In this study, the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ material prepared by the melting, quenching, and annealing process was selected as the matrix phase (sample 4) to carry out the following experiment.

The Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ bulk ingot was artificially ground into powder, as shown in Figure 2a. It can be seen that the size distribution of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ particles is not uniform. In order to obtain smaller uniform particles, the powder was subjected to mechanical ball milling, and the SEM image of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ powder after ball milling is shown in Figure 2b. The XRD of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix was analyzed before
and after ball milling, as shown in Figure 3. There was no phase change reaction in the process of ball milling of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix.

**Figure 1.** The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ powders with different cooling rates: (a) from 20° to 80°; (b) amplified XRD patterns from 10° to 40°. Samples 1–3 correspond to Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ samples with different cooling rates and sample 4 corresponds to the annealed Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample.

**Figure 2.** SEM images of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ powder: (a) before ball milling; (b) after ball milling.
Figure 4 shows the XRD patterns of \( x \) vol \% TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) \((x = 0, 0.6, 1.0, 1.4, 1.8)\) composites after ball-milling. The XRD patterns of composites samples are similar to that of Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) matrix samples. The diffraction peaks of all the samples correspond to the Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) phase (PDF#65-4145). The peak of TiO\(_2\) phase is hardly found in the XRD patterns, which may be attributed to its low content. In addition, no diffraction peaks corresponding to other phase was found, which indicates that there was no reaction between the introduced nano-TiO\(_2\) particles and the Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) matrix in the process of ball-milling. Figure 5a shows the TEM image of the starting powders of TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles. It is shown that the size of spherical TiO\(_2\) particles is 10–20 nm. Figure 5b–f shows the SEM images of the fracture surface of TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composite samples. It can be observed in Figure 5b that the grain size of Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) matrix is about 3 \( \mu \)m. Rapid sintering process with SPS technology can effectively inhibit the growth of grains, which would result in more grain boundaries and scatter more phonons. It also can be found in Figure 5c,d, and f that the nano-TiO\(_2\) particles are mainly distributed on the grain boundary. With the content of nano-TiO\(_2\) increasing from 0.6 vol \% to 1.8 vol \%, the grain size of Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) decreases from 2.2 \( \mu \)m to 0.9 \( \mu \)m. The nano-TiO\(_2\) particles in the sintering process effectively inhibited the growth of grains, and the inhibitory effect is more obvious with the increase of nanoparticles [20–22]. In contrast, it can be found in Figure 5e that most TiO\(_2\) particles in the 1.4\%TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composites were distributed in the internal grain. This is possibly related to the surfactivity of powder, SPS process, and so on. This issue will be investigated in future work. In addition, when the amount of nano-TiO\(_2\) reached 1.8 vol \%, the TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composite kept more holes at the grain boundary. The microstructure of TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composites could influence the electrical and thermal transport properties of the materials. The relative density of TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composites is shown in Table 1. It can be seen that the addition of nano-TiO\(_2\) reduced the relative density of TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composites.

Table 1. Density of the \( x \) vol \% TiO\(_2\)/Cu\(_2\)SnSe\(_3\) composites with different nano-TiO\(_2\) content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( x )TiO(_2)/Cu(_2)SnSe(_3)</th>
<th>( x = 0 )</th>
<th>( x = 0.6 )</th>
<th>( x = 1.0 )</th>
<th>( x = 1.4 )</th>
<th>( x = 1.8 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Density (g/cm(^3))</td>
<td>6.042</td>
<td>6.017</td>
<td>5.833</td>
<td>5.686</td>
<td>5.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative density</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>97.8%</td>
<td>97.2%</td>
<td>96.5%</td>
<td>95.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Figure 5e, the nano-TiO2 particles which were distributed at the grain boundary effectively suppressed the grain growth, resulting in a large number of grain boundaries during the sintering process. These grain boundaries have great effects on the transport of the carriers, which reduce the conductivity of the material. However, the conductivity of the 1.4% TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 sample was effectively improved. As shown in Figure 5e, the nano-TiO2 particles in the 1.4% TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites were mainly degenerate semiconductor behavior. The composites samples showed lower electrical conductivity than the Cu2SnSe3 matrix except for the 1.4% TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 sample, which suggests that the addition of nano-TiO2 into the Cu2SnSe3 matrix can reduce the electrical conductivity. Nano-TiO2 particles affect the carrier transport, leading to a reduction in the conductivity of the material. On the other hand, the nano-TiO2 particles which were distributed at the grain boundary effectively suppressed the grain growth, resulting in a large number of grain boundaries during the sintering process. These grain boundaries have great effects on the transport of the carriers, which reduce the conductivity of the material. However, the conductivity of the 1.4% TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 sample was effectively improved. As shown in Figure 5e, the nano-TiO2 particles in the 1.4% TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites were mainly

![Figure 4. The XRD patterns of the x vol % TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites.](image)

![Figure 5. (a) TEM image of the initial TiO2 nanoparticles. (b-f) SEM images of the x vol % TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites: (b) x = 0; (c) x = 0.6; (d) x = 1.0; (e) x = 1.4; (f) x = 1.8.](image)
distributed in the internal grain. Therefore the effect of suppressing the grain growth was not as obvious as that of other composites. Meanwhile, the carrier concentration of 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite at room temperature is listed in Table 2. The increase in the conductivity of the 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite is attributed to the high carrier mobility. These nanoparticles distributed in the grain provide a special channel and contribute to the transport for the carrier. The electrical conductivity of 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample was $2.91 \times 10^3$ $\Omega^{-1}/$cm at room temperature. Compared with the electrical conductivity of doped-Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample in the previous studies [8–11], the electrical conductivity of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample was higher, which is possibly due to high carrier concentration (about $10^{21}$ cm$^{-3}$), as shown in Table 2.

![Figure 6. Temperature dependence of electrical conductivity for the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites.](image)

**Table 2.** The physical parameters of the $x$ vol % TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite at room temperature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$x$TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$</th>
<th>$R_H$ ($10^{-3}$ cm$^3$/C)</th>
<th>$p$ (cm$^{-3}$)</th>
<th>$\mu$ (cm$^2$/Vs)</th>
<th>$\sigma$ ($10^3$ $\Omega^{-1}$/cm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$x = 0$</td>
<td>3.368</td>
<td>1.86 × $10^{21}$</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x = 0.6$</td>
<td>3.621</td>
<td>1.71 × $10^{21}$</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x = 1.0$</td>
<td>3.262</td>
<td>1.92 × $10^{21}$</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x = 1.4$</td>
<td>3.570</td>
<td>1.75 × $10^{21}$</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x = 1.8$</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.89 × $10^{21}$</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7 shows the temperature dependence of Seebeck coefficient ($\alpha$) of the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite samples. All samples kept positive values of $\alpha$ in the whole temperature range, indicating that they are $p$-type semiconductors. The Seebeck coefficient of all samples increased with increasing temperature. The Seebeck coefficient of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites was higher than that of the matrix material, except for the 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample. The introduction of nano-TiO$_2$ brings a large number of phase interfaces, which can filter out the low-energy carriers so as to increase the density of states of the material. As a result, the Seebeck coefficient of composites was improved. As for the 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample, the lower Seebeck coefficient should be related with the different distribution of nano-TiO$_2$ particles in the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite. Combined with the above analysis of the microstructure and conductivity, there is an effective channel in the composite which allows a large number of low-energy carriers to pass through, so the composite maintains a lower Seebeck coefficient. The detailed reason will be further investigated. Figure 8 shows the temperature dependence of the power factor (PF) of the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites. The PF of 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ reached $5.27 \times 10^{-4}$ Wm$^{-1}$ K$^{-2}$ at 700 K, which is 20% higher than that of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix material ($4.59 \times 10^{-4}$ Wm$^{-1}$ K$^{-2}$). For the other TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites, since the increase in the Seebeck
coefficient is not sufficient to compensate for the decrease in conductivity, the PF of the composite samples is maintained at a lower level than that of the Cu2SnSe3 matrix.

![Graph showing temperature dependence of thermal conductivity](image)

**Figure 7.** Temperature dependence of Seebeck coefficient for the TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites.

**Figure 8.** Temperature dependence of power factor (PF) for the TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites.

Figure 9 shows the temperature dependence of thermal conductivity ($\kappa$) of the TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composite. Compared with the $\kappa$ of Cu2SnSe3 matrix, it can be seen in Figure 9a that the TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites maintained the lower $\kappa$, except for the 1.4%TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 sample. The 1.4%TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composite kept higher $\kappa$ than that of the Cu2SnSe3 matrix. The lattice thermal conductivity ($\kappa_L$) of the TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composite can be calculated from the total thermal conductivity ($\kappa$) minus the carrier thermal conductivity $\kappa_e$ ($\kappa_e = L\sigma_T$), as shown in Figure 9b. It can be observed that the $\kappa_L$ of 1.4%TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 sample was significantly reduced before 450 K. The higher $\kappa$ of 1.4%TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 in the temperature of 450–700 K is mainly due to the high $\kappa_e$, which is closely related with the distribution of nano-TiO2 phase in the internal grain. The expected decrease of $\kappa_L$ due to the addition of nano-TiO2 is not evident in other TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 composites, which is possibly attributed to the distribution of nano-TiO2 in the grain boundaries. However, the $\kappa_L$ of 1.4%TiO2/Cu2SnSe3 sample is 1.43 W/mK at room temperature, which is now the lowest value of lattice conductivity for Cu2SnSe3 sample and obviously lower than the previous studies. Fan et al. reported a lattice thermal conductivity of about 2.25 W/mK at room temperature for Ga-doped Cu2SnSe3 sample fabricated by hot pressing sintering [10]. Compared
with the Ga- or In-doped Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample, the lower $\kappa_L$ of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ sample in this study should be related with the distribution of TiO$_2$.

**Figure 9.** (a) Temperature dependence of total thermal conductivity and (b) lattice thermal conductivity for the TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites.

Figure 10 shows the temperature dependence of the dimensionless figure of merit $ZT$ of TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites. It can be seen that the $ZT$ value of 1.4\%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite was not improved due to its higher $\kappa$. The maximum $ZT$ value for 1.0\%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite is 0.30 at 700 K, which is 17\% higher than that of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix.

**Figure 10.** Temperature dependence of $ZT$ for TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites.
4. Conclusions

In this study, TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites were prepared by melting, ball milling, and spark plasma sintering. The distribution of nano-TiO$_2$ in the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix plays an important role in the thermoelectric transport properties. For the 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite, the nano-TiO$_2$ particles were mainly distributed in the internal grain, and the higher carrier mobility gave it a higher conductivity. The higher carrier thermal conductivity allowed the 1.4%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ to have a higher total thermal conductivity. For the other TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites, the nano-TiO$_2$ particles were mainly distributed on the grain boundary of the Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix, and the growth of the grains was effectively inhibited. Due to the lower carrier thermal conductivity, the other TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composites had a lower total thermal conductivity. The maximum ZT value for 1.0%TiO$_2$/Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ composite was 0.30 at 700 K, which is 17% higher than that of Cu$_2$SnSe$_3$ matrix.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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